

SECOND LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE THE LORD PROVOST
AND TOWN-COUNCIL OF EDINBURGH.

BY

DR KNOX.



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NEWINGTON, 15th July 1837.

TO THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE THE LORD PROVOST,
AND TOWN-COUNCIL OF EDINBURGH.

GENTLEMEN,

My former Letter, which I had the honour to address to you on the matter of the Pathological Chair, was written in great haste, and under an impression (for a belief in which there were some grounds) that it was the intention or the wish of a part, at least, of the Council to act hurriedly. Since you have not come to any resolution in respect to the mode of supplying the deficiency caused by Dr Thomson's inability to discharge the duties of his office, I beg leave respectfully again to offer myself as a Candidate for the Pathological Chair, and to obtrude myself on your notice by a Second Letter, for which I plead in excuse the necessity of rendering my former proposal clear and distinct, and to reply to a communication you have in the interval received from a junto of the Professors of the University.*

"Edinburgh, 7th July 1837.

* "We, the undersigned Medical Professors in the University of Edinburgh, understanding that the Town Council, as Patrons of the University, have resolved to accept Dr Thomson's resignation of the Chair of General Pathology, and engaged that he shall receive L. 150 annually as a retiring allowance from his successor, respectfully beg to make the following proposal :—

"Believing that the institution of a Chair of General Pathology in the University, though so far justified by the high reputation and eminent qua-

Without referring again to the sufficiently notorious and odious manner in which the Chairs of General Pathology and Surgery were originally instituted, or to circumstances which must be exceedingly well known to your Honourable Council, and which, though trivial in them-

ifications of Dr Thomson, was not required or expedient, since the subjects appropriated to it are inseparably connected with several other established departments of medical instruction, and most profitably taught in connexion with them ; and knowing that the circumstance of such a course being imperative on candidates for graduation in Edinburgh, is peculiarly oppressive, as there is no similar Chair in any other University of Great Britain or Ireland—we earnestly desire that this Professorship be abolished—and we, therefore, respectfully propose to the Council that it be now abolished, and that the retiring allowance to Dr Thomson shall be defrayed from the proceeds of a course of Lectures on General Pathology, which we are willing to undertake to deliver annually during his lifetime, on the understanding that the fee shall not exceed what may be estimated as sufficient for the purpose, and that any incidental surplus shall go to the matriculation fund.

“ We are willing to bind ourselves to make good the full amount of Dr Thomson’s salary ; and we hope that this proposal will appear to the Council sufficient proof, that, in desiring the abolition of the Chair of General Pathology, we are actuated solely by our thorough conviction of its being unnecessary, and injurious to the interests of the Medical School, and by our anxiety to maintain the credit and efficiency of the University.

(Signed) “ W. P. ALISON, P. Institutes of Medicine.
 “ R. CHRISTISON, P. Materia Medica.
 “ JAMES SYME, P. Clinical Surgery.
 “ CHARLES BELL, P. Surgery.

“ Edinburgh, 7th July 1837.

“ We, the undersigned Medical Professors in the University of Edinburgh, beg to express our entire approbation of the measures proposed above by our colleagues.

(Signed) “ JAMES HOME, P. Practice of Medicine.
 “ G. BALLINGALL, P. Military Surgery.
 “ T. S. TRAILL, P. Med. Jurisprudence.
 “ THOS. CHAS. HOPE, P. Chemistry.
 “ R. GRAHAM, P. Medicine and Botany.
 “ JAS. HAMILTON, P. Midwifery.’

selves, as matters of general interest, did yet produce a strong and lasting impression on the minds of the Medical Profession in Scotland, an impression highly unfavourable to the then existing Ministry, and to their predecessors in office ; without referring, I repeat, to these unpleasant circumstances, I earnestly beg leave to point out to you, as a fact undenialble, that the creation of these two, or of any twenty, University Chairs, is not in itself an oppressive act either to the student or to the public, as has been most erroneously stated to you in a Report bearing the signatures of Messrs Christison, Syme, and Alison ; *it is the rendering such Chairs imperative*, that makes the act oppressive, but this, in hopes, no doubt, of its escaping the notice of the Council, those gentlemen have carefully kept out of view.

The subdivision of the various branches of the medical art, and the distribution of these subdivisions through a variety of teachers, can never be an oppressive act in itself, but rather a great advantage, both to the school of Medicine as a school, and to the public generally. It calls forth men eminent in particular lines,—offers new incentives to honourable ambition, and polishes and improves every branch of our profession ; but the rendering such courses of lectures *imperative* on each individual student or candidate for medical honours, whatever be his abilities, his acquirements, or his means,—therein lies the great evil of the system, but which, for the most obvious reason in the world, the Committee of Professors cautiously avoid touching on, they being holders generally of Chairs which, in respect to their being *imperative*, are highly oppressive, and most injurious to the public interest. I will even go farther, and boldly assert, that the foundation of *imperative* and exclusive chairs of Clinical Surgery and of Surgery, created for the direct purpose of driving the most eminent surgeons out of this city, was an act at once the most injudicious and most oppressive which

the history of our University contains. And as if to render the founding a chair of Clinical Surgery still more oppressive and still more injurious to the interests of the school, it was managed (a stronger term would suit better) to enrol its holder amongst the list of examinators for University honours, so that the extraordinary spectacle presented itself of *two surgeons* examining *candidates* for a *physician's diploma*, neither of whom had ever studied or practised physic, but to one of whom was assigned the duty of questioning the student as to his knowledge of the symptoms of surgical disease; and to the other was left the task of ascertaining what were the candidate's notions respecting the application of splints and bandages. On precisely the same principle might you add a working chemist or anatomist to the faculty of Examinators, and thus puzzle and harass the candidate by a variety of persons performing the same duties, each after a different fashion.

It seems to me, with great deference and respect for your better judgments, that the Committee of Professors, who have declared the existence of the General Pathological Chair a highly oppressive measure, have not clearly defined to you in what that oppression consists. They must mean it to be oppressive, either on the score of money, or on the ground of forcing this branch of Medical Education upon the attention of the student; but, as I trust they will not venture to say that Pathological Anatomy is a branch of medical education that may safely be neglected by any medical student, then it is to be presumed that they consider the existence of the Chair as *oppressive* only in so far as regards the *fees* exacted for the course. Why not, therefore, do away at once with its exclusive and imperative privileges of compelling the student to acquire his knowledge of Pathology *there and there only?* Elect a successor to Dr Thomson, with instructions to restore the Chair to its original object, viz. the teaching Pathological Anatomy, a subject now taught by

eminent anatomists in Paris and elsewhere, and leave to this gentleman, whoever he may be, the care of providing the very moderate retiring pension, which the distinguished Physician now holding the Chair most unhappily seems to consider an object of some moment. This is my proposal, and on these terms I shall be happy and proud to accept of the vacant office.*

To the scheme proposed by Messrs Christison, Syme, and Alison, of lecturing on General Pathology, for a small remunerating fee, which is still to be imperative on the student, I am sure you will never give your consent. It is the substitution of a mean and pitiful oppression for one of a grosser character, and for this reason alone, like all small exactions

* The mischiefs arising from the crowding into the medical curriculum of such Chairs as Clinical Surgery (an odious job), Natural History, Medical Jurisprudence, Botany, &c., and making them at the same time *imperative* and *exclusive*, are almost incalculable, and they but begin to shew themselves. They harass the student, break up his hours of study, put an entire stop to all *practical* pursuits, and reduce his whole acquaintance with medical matters to that condition happily and best expressed by the phrase “Diffusion of Useless Knowledge,” for such it most assuredly is. And all this destruction of sound and rational views respecting medical education, has been got up, is there not reason to fear, merely to gratify with pensions a certain number of our fellow citizens, unable or unwilling to provide for themselves by fair competition with others. Establish a Board of Examinators, no matter how few (the fewer the better), of men eminent for their knowledge of the various branches of our profession, and render it strictly *imperative* that all candidates for medical or surgical honours shall bring to that Board *a tolerably competent knowledge of their art; this alone interests the public*, and with this alone is any Legislature, whether local or general, entitled to interfere; all other restrictions as to the *mode of acquiring* that knowledge, together with compulsory attendance on the lectures of *particular individuals*, payment of a certain amount of fees to *particular colleges*, &c. &c. all this is oppressive in the highest degree, iniquitously unjust, and simply devised to suit the views of corrupt corporate bodies. It is a *levelling system*, whereby a political partisan can be put into a medical chair in a university here, in London, or elsewhere, although that person literally may happen not to be a *medical man strictly so called*. This extraordinary circumstance actually took place lately in London.

and impositions, is sure to engender contempt and utter dislike on the part of the payer.

This plan of conducting a course of Pathological Anatomy (for such, I am confident, the Chair in question must become) is indeed novel, but quite impracticable, and, in the eyes of practical men, highly ludicrous ; moreover, eminently calculated to lower the respectability of the University, by checking the progress of a branch of medicine which of late years has made singular progress abroad, and has obviously contributed, in no small degree, to attract to Paris such crowds of foreign students and of medical men in general.*

To put Dr Thomson's chair into Commission (Commissions being the order of the day), and he, though *ab agendo*, still alive, is a curious make-shift expedient unworthy of the known characters for candour and plain-dealing of Dr Alison and Sir Charles Bell ; repugnant to all I had previously known of these gentlemen. What more ludicrous can be imagined than these "Pathological Commissioners" meeting alternately, and flatly contradicting each other upon most points of doctrine taught *ex cathedra*, for no two men differ more widely from each other than do Sir Charles and Dr Alison ; the one maintaining the doctrines of Whytt, Cullen, and the older physiologists ; the other, an eminent Surgeon and *Practical Physiologist* of our own times, founder of a new system which, right or wrong, and in defiance of the elaborate printed and published refutation by his colleague Dr Alison, will have its day. Thus hour by hour will they contradict each other from the same Chair, and the student will be still further benefited by the flat contradictions offered to Sir Charles's views on Pathology by Mr Syme, for they

* The late Baron Dupuytren left £10,000 to found a Museum of Morbid or Pathological Anatomy, and to endow that Chair with a salary ; he never said one word about *General Pathology*, because he knew that every Surgical, Medical, or Clinical Lecturer, must teach that part of General Pathology which appertains to his course.

also are opposed to each other ;—nor can I find any remedy for such confusion but in the circumstance, curious enough in itself, and ingeniously devised, I mean the addition of a fourth Commissioner, a distinguished chemist and thorough-bred critic, who, alike unacquainted with, and regardless of, the doctrines of his fellow Commissioners, may sit in judgment upon these doctrines with all the advantages of a great previous ignorance of the facts of the case, and of most of the matters in discussion.

In conclusion, I beg leave respectfully to add, that there is something exceeding painful to me, and I am aware to many others, in the proposal of these “Pathological Commissioners” to provide for the retiring pension of Dr Thomson out of a course of lectures taught gratuitously, and for a paltry fee, and also in the language, almost eleemosynary, which they employ in their report. I sincerely trust you will put an immediate stop to a discussion disreputable, in my humble opinion, to all parties ; nor can I charge my recollection with a discussion of a similar nature having ever arisen within the walls of the University. Of this I am very sure, that any proposal couched in the language used by the reporters towards Dr Thomson, would have been immediately put down in the Corporate body to which I have the honour to belong, who, I feel confident, should the University find a difficulty in meeting the exigency, will step forward in aid of one of their most distinguished, and, I may also add, one of their most esteemed and respected, members. Much as I have been personally opposed to Dr Thomson throughout life, I cannot but feel a great dislike to the attempts made in various quarters to disparage his labours in the cause of Medical Science. I have the honour to be,

MY LORDS and GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient servant,

R. KNOX.

P. S. Since writing the above, a copy of a document, by a Candidate for the vacant Chair, has been put into my hands, containing statements eminently calculated to mislead those who, like you, Gentlemen, are not professional. A strong attempt is therein made to mix up Pathology and Clinical Medicine, and to induce you to put it upon the same footing as Clinical Surgery. It is therein stated, amongst other arguments in favour of a new job, "*You have likewise a Class of Clinical Medicine.*" Now, happily, there are four classes taught by separate Professors, and it would be still more advantageous for the student and for the public if there were ten such Classes. 2d, It is said, that "*the Chair of Clinical Medicine has neither Professor nor Patron, and yet it has existed for more than half a century. No one is responsible that its duties are properly performed.*" Its existence for half a century must then be attributed to its utility.

The object kept in view by the special pleader, whose words I just quote, is simply to mislead ; he knows that there are four of the ablest Professors for the time being who deliver Clinical and Pathological lectures, and who are each responsible for their respective courses, advertising them in their names. The object of the writer of that letter is to induce you to do away with the powerful and wholesome competition and exertion necessarily produced by able teachers succeeding each other, and to invest him with a comfortable snug job like the Clinical Surgical Chair. Indeed, a little further on he says so. "*Why should there not be a Professor of Clinical Medicine as well as one of Clinical Surgery ?*" which is simply saying, since you have one scandalous job in a Clinical Surgical Chair, why not make two jobs by creating a Clinical Medical one ? The writer again asks, "*Why should there be a Chair receiving fees without a Professor ?*" Now, mark the special pleader again, and his object. There are four Professors receiving fees, and all teaching Clinical Medicine, and herein consists the excellency of the pre-

sent system—a system which laid the very basis for the vast reputation of the University of Edinburgh in respect to the teaching of Clinical Medicine. To touch this system in any other way than to extend it, by adding to the numbers of those teaching Clinical Medicine, and doing away with its imperative nature, would be to sap the foundations of the University. The accident of Clinical Medicine being imperative is the more to be deplored as being a supererogatory act of injustice, since, if left to himself, no Student would venture to appear before a *proper Board of Examinators* without having previously attended several courses of Clinical Medicine. Even at this moment, although the number of teachers of Clinical Medicine is so considerable, the student can with difficulty obtain all the advantages which he requires from this important branch. And here is a person affecting to be acquainted with practical teaching, who advocates a sole professorship of “Pathology” and “Clinical Medicine,” and a consequent crowding together of numerous students into the over-heated wards of an hospital, following *one teacher* and subjected to all the vexation of an odious monopoly. I have no hesitation in declaring the scheme absolutely impracticable; and, in conclusion, respectfully entreat you to regard with attention the wise proceedings of our predecessors in founding the University, whose great object for nearly a century seems to have been, the requiring a superior practical Medical Education on the part of all candidates for Medical honours, but interfering as little as possible with the *how* or the *where* that Education was obtained.

